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ABSTRACT

This guide draws on findings of research that explored key features of effective career discussions at work in major employing organizations in the United Kingdom. Intended for employees and the wide range of people positioned to offer advice and support on career development, it presents practical tips for these "receivers" and "givers" of career support and ideas on how to encourage effective career discussions. Tips are categorized into four steps, with tips for givers appearing separately from tips from receivers. The left column has tips for givers, the right for receivers. Step 1, setting up the discussion, covers individual responsibility for career, awareness of human resources systems, and preparation. Step 2, establishing trust, addresses agreeing a contract, listening and empathy, and questioning and probing. Step 3, sharing information, discusses information about self and situation, exploring pros and cons of options, questioning and probing, and setting direction. Step 4, agreeing action, covers concluding the discussion and agreeing actions and any further contact. Suggestions follow as to what givers and receivers of advice should not do. Notes place career discussions in their context: individuals vary in how often they need to discuss their careers with others; different kinds of people can offer career support; career discussions can convey different kinds of information, raise deep personal issues, and need to be managed; and after a career discussion a range of actions may be taken. (YLB)

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Guide

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Practical Tips for Effective Career Discussions at Work

Most organisations now expect employees to take charge of their own careers. However, people need access to information and advice from others to be able to manage their careers effectively. Drawing on the accounts of over one hundred managers and professionals, recent NICEC research has explored the key features of effective career discussions at work in major employing organisations. When we talk here of an 'effective career discussion', we mean a discussion which is of positive value to the individual in managing their career.

The research showed that employees receive career support from a wide range of people within and outside their employing organisation. These include line managers, other managers, mentors and coaches, HR, external specialists, work colleagues and friends. Many career discussions take place outside any formal HR process.

People who are confident in managing their own career development have generally learned how to get a range of advice, information and support from other people. Too few employees go out to find such help and too few managers in organisations offer it freely enough. The giving and receiving of career support does not have to be seen as a mysterious and specialised activity. The biggest risk at present is that too few career discussions take place and many questions therefore go unanswered.

This Guide draws on the findings of the research, and is intended both for employees and for the wide range of people who find themselves in a position to offer advice and support on career development. It presents practical tips for these 'receivers' and 'givers' of career support and some ideas on how effective career discussions can be encouraged.

The Guide has been written by Wendy Hirsh and Charles Jackson (NICEC Fellows) and Jenny Kidd of the Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck, University of London.

NICEC

The National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling (NICEC) is a network organisation initiated and supported by CRAC. It conducts applied research and development work related to guidance in educational institutions and in work and community settings. Its aim is to develop theory, inform policy and enhance practice through staff development, organisation development, curriculum development, consultancy and research.

CRAC

The Careers Research and Advisory Centre is a registered educational charity and independent development agency founded in 1964. Its education and training programmes, publications and sponsored projects provide links between the worlds of education and employment. CRAC has sponsored NICEC since 1975.

The Effective Career Discussion Consortium
This Briefing is based on research funded by and conducted with a consortium of organisations: BP plc, the Cabinet Office, Consignia, the Home Office, the Department of Health, Kingfisher plc, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Rolls-Royce plc.

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TIPS FOR GIVERS AND RECEIVERS OF CAREER SUPPORT

SETTING UP THE DISCUSSION

Individual responsibility for career • Awareness of HR systems • Preparation

TIPS FOR GIVERS

See the individual as in the driving seat of their career, and yourself as someone who can help them manage this better. Don't be afraid to offer career support to employees who don't report to you.

Talk to those you manage about their future as well as their job performance. In helping other people, consider whether you need to involve their boss.

Explain where career development fits with appraisal. Suggest a follow-up meeting if career issues come up in appraisal but need more time. Try to put careers on the agenda in regular one-to-one progress meetings.

Don't spring job moves on staff without warning. Find space for a proper discussion.

Career discussions which occur naturally in day-to-day work can be helpful. If you are giving important feedback do take the time to explain properly.

Take time to prepare. If you don't know the individual see if they are happy to send you a CV. Tell them in advance if there are issues you want to raise.

TIPS FOR RECEIVERS

Put yourself in the driving seat. Think about who can help you address career issues. Make sure you get the help you need by asking for it.

Try to develop a relationship with your boss such that they will actively support your career. If this is impossible, try to keep your boss informed.

If you want to raise a career issue in appraisal, tell your appraiser beforehand. Ask for a follow-up to the appraisal meeting if there are career issues you could not discuss fully. Take advantage of other types of career support offered by your organisation.

If you are planning a job move, start raising the issue well in advance.

If you want to talk to someone, ask for an appointment and explain what you want to discuss. Ask for at least half an hour.

Prepare by thinking about your situation and skills and their fit with the business. Think about what you want to discuss and what you want from the discussion.

ESTABLISHING TRUST

Agreeing a contract • Listening and empathy • Questioning and probing

TIPS FOR GIVERS

Share your agenda with the individual. Consider agreeing a 'contract' for the discussion.

Establish an open feel to the conversation. Put the other person at their ease. Show your interest, listen carefully, check you understand what they are saying. Make clear you understand they may wish the discussion to be confidential. Be open about your own career if appropriate.

Don't let short-term business priorities constrain or bias your advice. Show you are interested in the person first and foremost. Think about the business overall, not just your part of it.

TIPS FOR RECEIVERS

Share your agenda with the giver.

Go into the discussion in an open frame of mind. Listen carefully to the information and advice offered and try not to be defensive. The more you can disclose your own concerns and feelings, the more you are likely to get out of the discussion.

Show you realise how your career plans relate to the business. Try to link your skill development to the organisation's needs.

SHARING INFORMATION

Information about self and situation • Exploring pros and cons of options • Questioning and probing • Setting direction

TIPS FOR GIVERS

It may help to have a framework in mind (*eg* Where are you now? Where do you want to be? How will you get there?).

Use your own and others' careers to illustrate career paths. But don't expect the individual to want a career like yours.

Challenge the individual's ideas where appropriate in a constructive way.

Try to meet the individual's needs for information, including opportunities outside the business. Where appropriate, suggest other people to talk to.

Help the individual identify a wide enough range of career options. Which do they feel would suit them best? Are their preferred options realistic?

Help the individual discuss what they really want out of work. If you sense the individual needs to explore more personal concerns, give them the opportunity to do so, but respect their right to keep these matters private.

TIPS FOR RECEIVERS

Listen for the frameworks the giver uses. They may be helpful in the future as well as in this discussion.

The giver's career experiences may provide useful insights, but you don't have to behave just like them.

Be ready to have your ideas challenged. Ask why the giver disagrees with you.

Try to broaden your understanding of the kinds of work open to you and how the changing business is affecting these.

If you have some career options in mind, seek the giver's views of their relative pros and cons.

Think about what you want in your work and how it fits into your life. Be prepared to discuss broader personal issues if you wish. But if the discussion gets too personal for your comfort, say so.

AGREEING ACTION

Concluding the discussion • Agreeing actions and any further contact

TIPS FOR GIVERS

Leave enough time to bring the discussion to a close and agree what happens next. Ensure the individual knows they can come back to you.

Agree which parts of the discussion are confidential, what will be shared with other named individuals, and any links with formal HR processes.

Does the individual need you to take any actions (*eg* help them make initial contact with others)? If you agree to do something, do it – and quickly.

TIPS FOR RECEIVERS

Make sure you come away with a clear view of what to do next. Ask if you can come back if you need to.

Agree what information should remain confidential. If information needs to be shared with others, clarify who will do this, how and when.

Try to leave with concrete things to do. Think about who else to inform. Thank the giver. Consider keeping them informed of your progress.

WHAT SHOULDN'T YOU DO?

AS A GIVER OF ADVICE YOU SHOULD NOT:

- Appear uninterested in the person asking for advice or fail to show empathy with their situation.
- Misunderstand the issue by failing to listen or to check with the individual.
- Jump in with a career suggestion or even a job offer without preparing the ground first.
- 'Toe the organisation/party line' rather than being frank and open.
- Promise to do something during a discussion and then fail to follow it up.

AS A RECEIVER OF ADVICE YOU SHOULD NOT:

- Wait for help to come to you rather than going out to find it.
- Fail to prepare the giver for the discussion.
- Reject advice or feedback out of hand, fail to listen attentively, or get aggressive or defensive.
- Appear interested only in yourself and not in the organisation or other people.
- Fail to tell the giver your real career issues.

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EFFECTIVE CAREER DISCUSSIONS

The practical hints and tips given on the previous pages assume people are already aware of the need for discussions about their career and have access to a suitable person to talk to. The notes below place career discussions in their context.

INDIVIDUALS VARY IN HOW OFTEN THEY NEED TO DISCUSS THEIR CAREERS WITH OTHERS

Some events trigger the need for discussion: *eg* applying for jobs and not being selected; feeling bored or 'stuck'; or organisational re-structuring. When making a major job move or change of career direction, an individual may need a number of discussions, possibly with more than one person. At other times, individuals need much less intensive support.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF PEOPLE CAN OFFER CAREER SUPPORT

Employees can talk to their boss (formally or informally), or to other managers (*eg* boss's boss, ex-boss, project managers, directors). Some of these managers may act as informal or formal mentors. Some organisations run career-related or training events which may provide the opportunity for discussion of career issues and some give access to career specialists (*eg* psychologists, career professionals). The HR or personnel function can be a useful port of call for career advice as can other colleagues at work, or friends and family outside work. If one person is not helpful, individuals should not be put off, but should try talking to someone else.

CAREER DISCUSSIONS CAN CONVEY DIFFERENT KINDS OF INFORMATION

This includes: feedback on performance, strengths and weaknesses; feedback on how an individual's potential is seen by the organisation; information about particular jobs or areas of work; a broad overview of career options inside or outside the organisation and how these might look in future; information on how to go about making a job move; and how to manage the organisational politics.

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CAREER DISCUSSIONS CAN RAISE DEEP PERSONAL ISSUES

Some career discussions go beyond offering information, or negotiating a job move or development opportunity. They explore the motivation of the individual, their work-life balance and their career aspirations. Such discussions can lead to a wider view of career options in terms of what would best suit that individual and their circumstances. These more exploratory discussions require high levels of openness and trust.

CAREER DISCUSSIONS NEED TO BE MANAGED

As with any exchange, both parties need to make sure the conversation covers the right issues and that they attend to the needs and feelings of the other person as well as themselves.

AFTER A CAREER DISCUSSION A RANGE OF ACTIONS MAY BE TAKEN

These include: development activities within the current job or through courses, projects, secondments; meetings with other people to explore further or gather information; and applying for specific job moves.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full report, *Straight Talking: Effective Career Discussions at Work*, is available price £25 (inc. p&p) from NICEC, Sheraton House, Castle Park, Cambridge CB3 0AX

Tel: 01223-460277
Fax: 01223-311708
E-mail: nicec@crac.org.uk

The research findings are summarised in a NICEC Briefing also called *Straight Talking*. Copies of both this Guide and the Briefing are available from NICEC on receipt of an A4 stamped (20p for 1 or 2 copies, 31p for up to 4, 38p for up to 6) and addressed envelope.

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